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ABSTRACT

The Reading First initiative is a central part of the federal "No Child Left Behind Act" of 2001. Reading First's primary goal is to improve reading instruction and student performance in kindergarten through grade 3. By March 2003 only half of the 50 state plans had been approved for funding. Approved states included seven Southern Regional Education Board states--Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Mississippi, Oklahoma, and Virginia. Lessons learned by these states during the review process, together with lessons learned by these and other states in earlier reading reform initiatives, may be useful in helping other states prepare reading plans that can win federal approval and achieve needed improvements in reading results. The following points reflect experiences common to all these states in the process of producing their final approved plans: there is no list of approved reading programs; target the worst-performing schools--real change must happen at the school level; no detail is too small; all decisions about program design and implementation should be data driven; providing professional development in reading to a school's entire faculty is a powerful instrument for change; it is essential that administrators go through some professional development with their teachers; professional development models that seek to train selected faculty from a school to go back and teach their peers often are unsuccessful; professional development should provide ample opportunities for teachers to apply their lessons directly to solving the problems of real students; train teachers in the use of peer coaching teams; involve universities and teacher education programs from the start; do not expect too much of the initial training--follow-up and reinforcement are the keys to success; and do not try to do too much too fast. (NKA)

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READING FIRST:

Lessons from successful state reading initiatives

SREB

David R. Denton

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The Reading First initiative is a central part of the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. Reading First is an ambitious effort to bring early reading instruction across the country up-to-date with new knowledge gained in recent years from high-quality, scientifically based research on the way children learn to read. With $900 million for grants to states in the 2002-2003 fiscal year and $1 billion in 2003-2004, Reading First could make a significant contribution to reaching all of the SREB education goals related to student achievement.

In line with the high level of funding provided for Reading First, the U.S. Department of Education established a high standard for approval of each state's plans for using the funds. By March 1, 2003, only half of the 50 state plans had been approved. The approved states included seven Southern Regional Education Board states – Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Mississippi, Oklahoma and Virginia. The lessons learned by these states during the review process, together with lessons learned by these and other states in earlier reading reform initiatives, may be useful in helping other states prepare reading plans that can win federal approval and achieve needed improvements in reading results.

SREB's first report on state efforts to improve reading instruction — *Getting Elementary Schools Ready for Children: Reading First* (1996) — focused on efforts in Arkansas to help first-grade children identified as being at-risk of reading failure. In the years since that first report, every SREB state has attempted some sort of initiative to improve reading instruction and reduce unacceptably high rates of reading failure. Many important lessons have been learned about what it takes to make a comprehensive reading reform effort successful.

Those lessons took on new importance with the enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act and establishment of the Reading First initiative in 2001. The primary goal of Reading First is to improve reading instruction and student performance in kindergarten through grade three.

To ensure that Reading First funds will be put to good use, the U. S. Department of Education established rigorous standards for approval of state plans, and those standards have been very strictly applied in the proposal-review process. As noted, the approval process has been slow, with only half of all states approved for funding by the middle of the 2002-2003 fiscal year. Among the first seven SREB states to win approval, it is no accident that Alabama, Arkansas and Mississippi, states that have been pursuing comprehensive reading reform longer and more systematically than most others, were among them. The other four SREB states to win early approval — Delaware, Florida, Oklahoma and Virginia — all submitted proposals that adhered closely to the federal guidelines. The following points reflect experiences common to all of these states in the process of producing their final approved plans.

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➢ *There is no list of approved reading programs.*

One of the most common misconceptions about Reading First has been that, despite all claims to the contrary, the reviewers for the U.S. Department of Education require states to choose from a very limited list of commercial reading programs. The experiences of the seven approved SREB states indicate that this is not true. None of the states felt that the reviewers were trying to get them to use specific programs, and several felt there was substantial flexibility in the choice of programs and materials.

Concerns about the acceptability of different instructional programs in Reading First stem from the dramatic increase in recent years in the availability of high-quality, scientifically based research on reading. The Reading First guidelines require that all aspects of each state's plan be supported by scientifically based research, but questions about how to define "scientifically based research," as well as about how results should be interpreted and applied, have been the subject of controversy among reading researchers and educators.

The experiences of these seven SREB states demonstrate that federal officials are willing to be quite flexible about how a state proposes to do things and what materials will be used, as long as the state shows clearly how its plan is consistent with available research. The best example of this flexibility is the approval of the Arkansas plan, which draws heavily on a method of helping at-risk students — Reading Recovery — that has been derided by many researchers. It is clear that Arkansas neutralized potential objections to the role of Reading Recovery by satisfactorily demonstrating to reviewers that its plan is consistent with current research. The review team praised Arkansas for the quality and comprehensiveness of its proposal.

At the same time, the reviewers also have been steadfast in their insistence that any program or strategy included in the plan must be supported by research documenting its effectiveness. The reviewers consistently refused to approve any proposal that included commercial reading programs or other instructional strategies that did not have adequate research support and/or were at variance with the converging research evidence on effective reading instruction.

One area where some confusion might arise is in the choice of assessments to use to determine students' reading levels and detect problems. The Reading First staff has a list of assessments that were reviewed and approved for use in the program. States are not limited to only those assessments. However, if they would prefer to use an assessment not on the list, it is their responsibility to have it reviewed by experts in the field and determined to be acceptable.

➢ *Target the worst-performing schools; real change must happen at the school level.*

Under Reading First, states identify high-need school districts and provide them with funding and intensive technical support to improve reading performance. To be eligible for Reading First funding, school districts must:

a. have the highest numbers or percentages of students reading below grade level in the state;

b. include an Empowerment Zone or Enterprise Community designated by either the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Affairs (urban areas) or the Department of Agriculture (rural areas);

c. have a significant number of Title 1 schools; or

d. have the highest numbers or percentages of Title 1 students in the state.

Priority must be given to districts with at least 6,500 students or 15 percent of all students in families living below the poverty level.

It appears, understandably, that states with existing reading initiatives that already focus on working with individual high-need schools may have an easier time gaining approval than those without comprehensive state initiatives or with initiatives that have used a different kind of approach. In part this is simply because states with similar initiatives already have laid some of the groundwork and learned some of the lessons that shaped the Reading First requirements.

States whose initiatives are substantially different from Reading First, particularly those with a focus on statewide reform, face a difficult decision. Should the existing initiative be maintained in its present form using state funds, or should it be merged into the new Reading First program? If the existing initiative is to be continued as a completely separate effort, the reviewers may have concerns about divided priorities and dilution of resources (several states have reported that reviewers were concerned about adequacy of planned staffing in their Reading First plans). On the other hand, re-engineering a program that is quite different so that it fits better with Reading First undoubtedly will require additional work and may involve problems dealing with contracts or guarantees already agreed to for future years.

Mississippi's state reading initiative initially focused primarily on a statewide professional development effort with technical assistance provided to any school as needed. The state department of education soon concluded, however, that many schools would require much greater hands-on support than had been anticipated. To make the best use of limited resources, a decision was made to focus intensive technical assistance on a limited number of high-need schools. Statewide professional development activities have continued, but the main thrust of the Mississippi reading reform model shifted toward the lowest-performing schools in the state. That shift prepared Mississippi to meet the requirements of Reading First more easily than might otherwise have been the case.

➢ *No detail is too small.*

Discussions with state reading officials in all of the approved states indicate that the effort to get their proposals approved was intense and stressful. The level of detail required by reviewers appears to be significantly greater than for previous federal grant programs related to reading.

One of the premises of Reading First is the principle that "... the ability to read and write does not develop naturally, without careful planning and instruction" (quoted directly from a 2001 International Reading Association position paper). This premise means that successful Reading First proposals must demonstrate detailed plans to provide explicit instruction in each of the five essential skill/knowledge areas involved in becoming an expert reader:

1. phonemic awareness (understanding of letter/sound relationships)
2. phonic word recognition
3. reading fluency
4. vocabulary development
5. reading comprehension.

Assembling a plan that adequately addresses these five interrelated areas satisfactorily is not a simple task under any circumstances. To provide a basic framework for its plan, Florida used a formula: 5 + 3 + (ii) + (iii) = improved reading outcomes, where

a. "5" represents the essential skill/knowledge areas listed above;

b. "3" stands for the three important types of assessment required to make sure all children learn to read — screening for possible problems in any of the five domains, diagnosing the problems and prescribing interventions, and continuous monitoring of progress;

c. the first two "i"s stand for Initial Instruction that is grounded in scientifically based research and aligned with state curriculum standards for reading;

d. the last three "i"s stand for Immediate Intensive Intervention to deal with problems and put the student on course toward reading success.

The proposal guidelines ask for extremely detailed information on the specific classroom practices to be used to address each of the five basic skill/knowledge areas, and all of those classroom practices must be supported by research. Delaware's plan does this in a five page section called "Description of a Reading First Classroom" that follows a hypothetical teacher's thoughts and actions in working with a class of children with a wide range of needs.

Reviewers also have been reluctant to accept any language they do not feel is absolutely clear. Oklahoma's original proposal specified that regional project coordinators would make "bimonthly" visits to schools participating in the program, meaning two visits per month. The reviewers noted that their dictionary defined "bimonthly" as meaning either "once every two months" or "twice a month" and requested that the wording be changed to say "twice a month" instead of "bimonthly."

The lesson for states that are yet to be approved is to make sure every aspect of the proposal guidelines has been addressed in exceptional detail and that all activities and materials can be justified according to the latest research. The approved state proposals demonstrate that there is an ample research base to draw upon in every area required by Reading First.

➢ *All decisions about program design and implementation should be data-driven.*

To be approved, Reading First proposals must reflect the latest findings from scientific research about what works. However, research findings are continually changing, and it should be assumed that state Reading First programs also will need to change as new research becomes available. Much of that new research should come from the programs themselves, but its usefulness will be limited unless it is based on sound data collection and analysis.

Every state Reading First plan should include a carefully designed evaluation component to document all plan activities and provide up-to-date data on the needs of the target population(s) and results of interventions. The more ways the data can be disaggregated the better. Data should be available by district; school and grade; urban, suburban and rural; race and ethnicity; and any other category that seems likely to be useful. It should be possible to cross-reference all categories. Florida's Reading First plan includes a highly detailed and heavily data-driven analysis of lessons learned under the Reading Excellence Act, the federal reading initiative that was superceded by Reading First.

Lessons from the Field

SREB states were working to improve reading performance well before the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act. Those efforts produced a number of lessons about successful program design and implementation that should be of interest to anyone working to reform reading. States approved for Reading First funding have found that heeding these lessons can contribute to the success of a proposal.

➢ *Providing professional development in reading to a school's entire faculty is a powerful instrument for change.*

Reading is central to every student's success in school. It should be understood by every elementary school teacher and administrator that learning to read is a school's top priority. Giving all faculty members the same professional development experiences in reading sends a clear message that everyone has a role in ensuring that all children learn to read. Virtually every type of class involves some sort of written language that can provide opportunities to reinforce students' developing reading skills and demonstrate the many different uses of written language. Most of all, training *all* faculty helps to create a critical mass of people who understand the difficult job teachers of reading face and can provide both substantive and moral support.

Since 1998, the Alabama Reading Initiative has trained the entire faculties of approximately 450 schools in two-week summer sessions. Each school is provided with individual technical support during the school year, and schools that are not making adequate progress are asked to participate in "retooling" sessions of about 30 hours. After the third year following the initial training, all schools repeat the summer training. Approximately 85 percent of schools that have participated in the initiative currently are on track toward desired performance improvements.

➢ *It is essential that administrators go through some professional development with their teachers.*

Principals cannot be instructional leaders for their teachers if they don't understand what they are trying to teach. If administrators are to be supportive as teachers try to apply lessons learned through professional development, the administrators need to understand firsthand what those lessons are. Administrators do not need to go through exactly the same professional development experiences as teachers — one size does not fit all — but they do need to share enough of the same experiences to promote mutual understanding and shared commitment.

➢ *Professional development models that seek to train selected faculty from a school to go back and teach their peers often are unsuccessful.*

The main problem with the so-called "train-the-trainers" model of professional development is identifying the best people to go through the initial training. For this approach to succeed, the people selected to participate in the initial training need to be good learners as well as good teachers of adults (so they can teach other teachers what they learned) and good teachers of students (so they can demonstrate new teaching techniques for the other teachers). Administrators may know which teachers are good learners and good classroom teachers, but they are less likely to know who will be able to teach other adults effectively. They also may lack objectivity because of their day-to-day working relationships with the teachers — going to the training should not be a reward for favored teachers or for seniority, for example. Reading First program staff may understand what is required, but they usually do not know the faculty well enough to identify teachers with the right characteristics. When the entire faculty goes through the same professional development, there is a common knowledge base to build on and the most effective trainers on the faculty will tend to emerge naturally.

➢ *Professional development should provide ample opportunities for teachers to apply their lessons directly to solving the problems of real students.*

If professional development only takes place in the abstract environment of a classroom full of other teachers, it can be very difficult for teachers to go back and translate it into actual classroom practice. Opportunities to apply abstract information to the real problems of real students, combined with regular and systematic observation and feedback by those providing the professional development, helps teachers learn by doing and see results firsthand. This is why most successful reading initiatives rely at least in part on reading specialists who work directly with teachers in the classroom. Assigning a full-time reading specialist or literacy coach to serve one school or a small group of schools (depending upon the size of the schools) can be the most effective single strategy for improving teaching and, ultimately, student performance. The seven SREB states whose plans were approved earliest all include some variation on this model.

➢ *Train teachers in the use of peer coaching teams.*

Peer coaching teams are groups of teachers with similar interests and responsibilities who get together regularly to share experiences and to assist each other in dealing with problems. Such teams can be extremely valuable in finding answers to questions through collective experience and reinforcing changes that need to be made in school or classroom practice. They can be especially helpful in identifying strategies for dealing with difficult problems involving the needs of individual children. Teachers who work in the daily isolation of the individual classroom can open up and find support in weekly or even monthly meetings with others who are trying to accomplish the same things. Effective peer coaching teams do not just happen by calling a meeting, however. There are rules and methods of discussion that help to keep the meetings focused on the topic at hand and to avoid confrontations, and these should be taught directly by someone who has experience working with peer coaching teams.

➢ *Involve universities and teacher education programs from the start, even if they are reluctant to participate.*

Higher education institutions with teacher preparation programs are important stake-holders in any effort to reform elementary and secondary education. They may at first be reluctant to buy into change initiatives that are based on new ideas that have not yet been fully integrated into mainstream educational theory. If those new ideas truly are based on valid scientific research, however, the colleges and universities eventually will have to accept them. Embracing colleges and universities as partners even when they are not ready to be embraced can go a long way toward changing their attitudes and, finally, converting them to allies.

Colleges and universities have been directly involved in the Alabama reading initiative since it began as a pilot program supported by the state business community with no significant state funding. Faculty members are involved in training and, in some, cases in providing direct technical assistance to schools. Disagreements among faculty members and state staff about the best approach to teaching reading have not disappeared, but there have been improvements in mutual understanding and communication.

➢ *Do not expect too much of the initial training; follow-up and reinforcement are the keys to success.* (But be sure to provide at least one thing that is guaranteed to show results.)

Teaching all children to read involves selecting from a wide range of different teaching strategies to meet the different needs of different children. It is like combining colors from a palate to achieve just the right effect in a painting; the skills needed to understand what kinds of instruction each child needs and to select and combine the appropriate strategies cannot be learned overnight. They must be retaught and reinforced repeatedly until the teacher attains the same kind of fluency in assessing needs and teaching to them that students need to develop in their reading.

While recognizing that change does not happen overnight, however, it is important to the morale of participating teachers to be able to point to at least a few early successes. One way this is accomplished in the Arkansas coaching model is by having specially trained literacy coaches work with novice teachers in their classrooms, modeling new instructional strategies with real pupils. After several days of modeling followed by coach/teacher conferences, the teachers are usually able to implement the modeled strategies successfully. The coach constantly monitors a teacher's actions and adjusts the level of support to provide an optimal learning experience combined with successful outcomes for the students.

➢ *Do not try to do too much too fast.*

In any program that involves identifying specific target schools and trying to achieve needed changes a few schools at a time, it is natural for program staff to want to replicate their successes as quickly as possible. When they see the things they are doing beginning to work, it is natural for reformers to want to bring the benefits to as many children as possible and to want to show funding agencies, whether governmental or private, as much progress as possible. It is important, however, not to forget that the real goal is to achieve lasting progress, not just headline-grabbing gains that may fade away quickly.

The keys to long-term success are reteaching and reinforcement of initial lessons. Just as practice is the only way to become a fluent reader, practice also is the way that teachers develop the broad range of skills and knowledge they need to teach all children to read. Most states that have focused their efforts on individual schools at some point have underestimated how much follow-up support schools need to solidify the changes in how reading is taught. This results in a dilution of both human and financial resources that is counterproductive. Schools already in the program may begin to slip back into old habits, while new program schools do not get enough resources or technical assistance to fully implement what they learn in the initial training program.

The Reading First reviewers have been especially sensitive to the need to ensure that state plans provide enough staff to support the goals they seek to achieve. Virginia's plan initially was rejected primarily for this reason. The revised plan that was approved includes more personnel funded through and dedicated to the program. Clearly, the reviewers believe that people are the key to effective and sustained change.

* * *

No two SREB states are the same, and no two state reading plans will be the same. Some lessons can only be learned by direct experience. In many areas, however, states should be able to profit from the experiences of others. Sharing information to help member states avoid having to reinvent the proverbial wheel is one reason that the SREB states are today in a position to achieve the ambitious Goals for Education adopted in 2002 and to lead the nation in educational progress.

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